

# Cracking coaching's final frontier

By John Sinnott

**Countless reasons have been put forward to explain England's repeated failure at international tournaments, so here is another one - a lack of intelligence.**

Nothing to do with GCSEs, A-levels or university degrees, mind, but when it comes to football IQ, surely England has been sitting in the dunce's corner for too long.

A year ago former England international Chris Waddle hinted at English footballers' cerebral deficiency when he said Arsenal winger Theo Walcott lacked a "football brain".

So given its importance, why is the brain the one part of the body for which players receive no special training or instruction?

That is where Belgian Uefa A licence coach Michel Bruyninckx comes in.

Over the last decade Bruyninckx has been training young players with what he calls "brain centred learning", a common idea in education, but a new concept for football.

Based on the premise that the brain is at least 1,000 times faster than any computer, Bruyninckx's intention is to make sure the young players he trains are programmed to take full advantage of the body's "hard disk" and become more skilful and intelligent footballers.

Standard Liege midfielder Steven Dufour - in the past linked with a move to Manchester United - and Utrecht attacking midfielder Dries Mertens, who came close to joining Ajax in the January transfer window, are the two most high-profile players with whom the Belgian coach has worked.

"He has given me that crucial extra metre in my head that is so important," Belgian international Mertens, who can kick the ball with both feet at a speed of 74mph, told BBC Sport.

There are plenty more players coming off the Bruyninckx production line - boys like Wannes van Tricht and girls like Imke Courtois - while clubs such as Lille in France and Espanyol in Spain have been in contact with other teenagers that the Belgian coach has helped to develop.

When Germinal Beerschot and Belgian international midfielder Faris Haroun came to work with Bruyninckx, he could not kick the ball with his left foot. Two years later his former club Racing Genk thought he was left-footed.

"Michel's methods and philosophy touch on the last frontier of developing world-class individuals on and off the field - the brain," renowned tennis coach educator Pete McCraw stated.

"His methods transcend current learning frameworks and challenge traditional beliefs of athlete development in team sports.

"It is pioneering work, better still it has broad applications across many sporting disciplines."

Bruyninckx coaches about 68 youngsters between the age of 12 and 19, players affiliated to first and second division Belgian clubs like Mechelen, Westerlo, Anderlecht, Sint-Truiden, OHL Leuven, Vise, KVK Tienen.

The youngsters have been selected by the Belgian football federation and study at Redingenhof secondary school near Brussels, an institution which plays a key role in Bruyninckx's work.

With his methods endorsed by ex-Belgian national coaches Paul van Himst and Robert Waseige, Bruyninckx estimates 25% of the 100 or so players that he has coached have turned professional or are in the women's national squads.

Compare this one-man Belgian football academy's success rate to England where, according to the Professional Footballers' Association chief executive Gordon Taylor, of the 600 boys joining Premier League and Football League clubs at the age of 16, 500 are out of the game by the time they are aged 21.

"We need to stop thinking football is only a matter of the body," the 59-year-old Bruyninckx commented. "Skilfulness will only grow if we better understand the mental part of developing a player.

"Cognitive readiness, improved perception, better mastering of time and space in combination with perfect motor functioning."

A world away from the traditional "on me 'ead son" philosophy of English football, Bruyninckx's idea, which he began studying 20 years ago, is to "multitask" the brain.

His drills start off simply but become increasingly more complicated to challenge players' focus and maintain their concentration.

Sometimes players train in bare feet to make them more "sensorially" aware; at other times they would play simple maths games while doing physical conditioning work.

Bruyninckx emphasises teamwork ahead of individualism, while aggression is frowned on - players do not wear shinpads - with tackling seen as the last solution to recover the ball.

"You have to present new activities that players are not used to doing. If you repeat exercises too much the brain thinks it knows the answers," Bruyninckx added.

"By constantly challenging the brain and making use of its plasticity you discover a world that you thought was never available.

"Once the brain picks up the challenge you create new connections and gives remarkable results."

It is an innovative approach, though neuroscientist Jessica Grahn strikes a word of caution with the "brain centred learning" label.

"It makes perfect sense to use lots of different approaches in order to maximize potential in people, because they are all different," said Professor Grahn of the Centre for Brain and Mind at the University of Western Ontario.

"Similarly, well-rounded training is bound to be better than singular, focused, training. To say these multi-pronged approaches work because they use multiple parts of our brain makes it sound more scientific, but really, that's about marketing.

"We can't do anything without our brains 'doing it' for us, so absolutely everything we train at involves changing our brains."

Labels aside, what is indisputable is the enormous amount of research that Bruyninckx has devoted to his method, which incorporates the idea of "differential learning", a training approach pioneered by Professor Wolfgang Schoellhorn of Mainz University.

"The idea is that there is no repetition of drills, no correction and players are encouraged not to think about what has gone wrong if they have made a mistake," explained Schoellhorn, an expert in kinesiology or human movement.

Only two professional clubs have picked up on Schoellhorn's work - Spanish giants Barcelona and German outfit Mainz - though in January he gave a lecture to the German Football Federation.

Working with Schoellhorn, Mainz coach Thomas Tuchel has incorporated drills of playing 20-a-side games or 11 versus 11 in one half of the pitch to improve speed and agility, with wingers only allowed to move within a specific space. Tactics would only be discussed using videos.

"Players have to take responsibility," Schoellhorn added. "They have to be creative and take responsibility and have to find the optimal solution. It's a whole philosophy.

"In football you are fighting against a lot of tradition. The reason why Barcelona's fitness coach Paco Seirullo and Tuchel were ready to listen was that they were already aware of this theory."

Mainz striker Lewis Holtby, who is of German-English descent, has described working with Tuchel as "extraordinary", while his midfield team-mate Andreas Ivanschitz has quipped that you need to be a university professor to understand the coaching sessions at the Bundesliga club.

Another German coach Horst Lutz, the founder of Life Kinetik, has worked with Borussia Dortmund or Hoffenheim, in the area of "brain performance".

Perhaps not surprisingly the way Barcelona play football has key reference points for Bruyninckx and during his training sessions players are continuously moving to better understand time and space when they practise the drills.

He explained: "If a team continuously plays the balls in angles at very high speed it becomes impossible to recover the ball. This requires high concentration and creativeness."

Not that Bruyninckx is only interested in exploring how the brain might best be used by his players. Biomechanics, psychology and kinesiology are equally important in what the Belgian coach calls a "holistic" approach to training.

"Many researchers warn that there is too much conditioning in our world and deliver athletes and people with health problems both physical as mental," the Belgian continued.

"If that is the case we can't go on with our traditional approaches - we must look for other ways."

Bruyninckx points out that in Spain there is no 11-a-side football before the age of 15. He also believes that if you want to produce technical footballers then forget the idea of competition.

"I create players that can play to win at the right moment, but firstly you have to explain that learning is more important than winning games," he added.

In addition to his desire to cultivate talented footballers, Bruyninckx has made it his aim to create well-rounded human beings, who if they fail to make the grade professionally, go on to successful careers outside football.

He stresses at the start and end of each game that players, parents, coaches and referees must greet one another.

He has just returned from a coaching demonstration at Dinamo Minsk for trainers from Belarus, Ukraine and Lithuania, but before leaving he took a wander round the Belarusian capital and bumped into some of the youngsters he had coached.

Bruyninckx said: "They came and greeted and shook my hand. This is the most important message: they respect me and they are telling me I've taught them a lot.

"It's about letting 'competition' go and opting for 'education and apprenticeship'."

Bruyninckx, who also uses his method to help elderly people and children with behavioural problems, demands that his players also concentrate on their academic studies.

If they do not they are banned from training with him - in some cases for up to a month at a time.

That demand for academic rigour has had spin-offs for Redingenhof secondary school.

"Progressively over five years the school performance has improved remarkably," Redingenhof headmaster Yves Dewolf commented.

"The results of 80% of the children in the "elite group" have always been above the average results of the regular secondary school children.

"The teachers' reactions are very positive regarding school performance and behaviour.

"The project has been extended to other sports as volleyball, dancing, basketball, table tennis, cycling and from next year tennis."

Like Schoellhorn, Bruyninckx has admitted that he is fighting "a lot of traditional habits" in football, but slowly the Belgian is beginning to win recognition for his work.

The Dutch Football Federation recently awarded its "More than Football" award - normally given to professional clubs - to Dutch amateur team club Apeldoorn which has started to use the Bruyninckx method in recognition of its social benefits.

"I've never met anyone like him in football with the possible exception of Wiel Coerver," said Eurosport commentator Herman Hobert, referring to the famed Dutch skills coach and former Feyenoord manager, nicknamed "the Albert Einstein of Football".

"Michel is so inspiring, so enthusiastic, always open minded and friendly. He gives players freedom, but also sets down boundaries that they mustn't cross. He demands very high standards," added Hobert, who is involved with the Apeldoorn project.

Elsewhere Canada, the United States, Nigeria, Egypt, Austria, Germany, France, Brazil and Turkey have been in contact with Bruyninckx about his method.

The one country to show minimal interest in the Belgian's approach is England.

"In the UK intelligence is not valued," stated ex-USSR international Sergei Baltacha, who is director of coaching at Bacons Football Academy - the first football development centre in London - and has been working Bruyninckx over the last year.

"But the brain - it is the most important thing; it is everything."